

## BOOK REVIEWS

BOOK REVIEW EDITOR, DANIEL F. AUSTIN

**Corn & Capitalism: How a Botanical Bastard Grew to Global Dominance.** Warman, Arturo. English translation by Nancy L. Westrate. 2003. University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill. xiii + 270 pp. US\$ 49.95 (hardcover), ISBN 0-8078-27665. US\$ 24.95 (paperback). ISBN 0-8078-5437-9.

This English version of *La historia de un bastardo: maíz y capitalismo* by Mexican anthropologist Arturo Warman, which is not a literal translation, was adapted by Nancy L. Westrate for readers in the United States. Changes have been made to accommodate linguistic, and cultural differences, as well as to update some of the material.

The first chapter puts corn into context among an array of important crop plants endemic to the Americas. The second chapter describes characteristics of the corn plant, its rich genetic diversity and wide geographic adaptability. In the third chapter, "A Bastard's Tale," the author examines the controversy of how and where corn was first domesticated, and sets the stage for the capitalism theme, which, superimposed on the scientific debate, is the ideological component running through the book. The basis for the ideology comes from belief by Europeans during the colonial period in "... an inherent inferiority of American nature and American civilization as compared to the Old World." Chapters 4-9 chronicle the rapid, post-Columbian adoption of corn as a staple food and its spread into China, Africa, and Europe. Chapter 10 includes the fascinating story about the rise of pellagra with the adoption of corn as a staple food of European peasants. As seen in chapters 11 and 12, corn gained dominance as an agricultural crop plant due to its high yield, and by the 20th century, had become the most valuable commodity crop in the United States. Hybrid seed corn, with vastly improved yields, began to be sold in the 1930's leading to the growth of the hybrid corn seed industry with its concomitant institutions, technological innovations, and industrialized agriculture.

Today the world grain trade is dominated by a handful of multinational corporations. The final three chapters underscore increasing market inequalities between rich and poor countries. In the closing chapters, Warman raises thought-provoking, alarming questions about food dependence, political coercion, and economic power in the hands of a few multinational companies. Although he originally intended to write a history of corn in Mexico, his research and in-

terests culminated in a broader global, social, and economic history with sparse attention to the Mexican roots of maize. I cannot help but wonder if the Mexican sequel he plans to write will link corn's destiny as a global commodity grain today with its equally compelling role in prehistoric economies as an exchange commodity in long distance trading networks connecting the peoples of Mexico with cultures as far away as North and South America.

MARY W. EUBANKS  
DEPARTMENT OF BIOLOGY  
DUKE UNIVERSITY  
DURHAM, NC 27708-0338  
EUBANKS@DUKE.EDU

### **Genetic Diversity of Cultivated Tropical Plants.**

Hamon, Perla, Marc Seguin, Xavier Perrier, and Jean Christophe Glaszmann, eds. 2003. Jointly published by CIRAD (Centre de cooperation internationale en recherche agronomique pour le développement), France and Science Publishers Inc. c/o Enfield Distribution Co., 234 May Street, Post Office Box 699, Enfield, NH 03748, USA. xvi + 359 pp. (hardcover). US\$ 80.00. ISBN 1-57808-264-1.

France has maintained strong research programmes in crops important to her former colonies and dependent territories. Some are centred on germplasm collections maintained in the tropics. Others, particularly those involving molecular techniques, are based in mainland France, principally at CIRAD, Montpellier. This book, an English translation of one published in French in 1999, addresses the relation between variability in those agronomic characters important in past domestication and future improvement, and variability in molecular markers. Agronomic characters are targets of human selection; molecular markers are probably selectively neutral in themselves but facilitate selection by plant breeders for genetically-linked traits of agronomic value. Of particular concern in this book is the extent to which molecular markers can be used to choose accessions to form a core collection representative of the diversity present in an entire germplasm collection, given that germplasm collections of many major crops are now so large that both maintenance and evaluation threaten to become prohibitively expensive.

Notwithstanding the title, this is not a review of